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ABSTRACT

This report poses four important questions for states about their students' readiness and answers these questions using data from ACT and College Board reports. Clarifying the issues of college readiness that confront member states of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) should provide states with tools for current and future policy decisions. To the first question, "Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?," the report responds yes, scores have improved and the proportions of students taking these tests have increased. The second question, "Are SREB states closing achievement gaps?," must be answered "no," SREB states have not made much progress in closing achievement gaps between Black and White, and Hispanic and White, students. "Are students in SREB states being sufficiently prepared for college?" No, many SREB states are not yet successful in preparing a sufficient proportion of their students for college. The final question, "How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?," must be answered by saying that a few SREB states rank high in student performance, but students in many SREB states are scoring considerably below their counterparts. SREB states have made progress, but substantial work remains to be done. (Contains 8 tables and 24 references.) (SLD)

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ACT and SAT Scores in the South:

The Challenge to Lead

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COLLEGE READINESS SERIES

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This college readiness series report was prepared by Joan M. Lord, SREB's director of educational policies, with research assistance from Alexandria Williams. This publication is funded through a grant from the United States Department of Education.

Information Brief

SREB

ACT and SAT Scores in the South: The Challenge to Lead

By asking and responding to four key questions, *ACT and SAT Scores in the South: The Challenge to Lead*[1] urges policy-makers to analyze the dynamics of college admission test scores, student demographic profiles and test taking patterns within their states.

College admission test scores are important indicators of SREB states' progress toward leading the nation in educational improvement as laid out in SREB's recent landmark report, *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead.* In better understanding these test scores, policy-makers will be able to capitalize on the momentum of a decade of improvement. Their goal should be to enable all students to be ready for college and career after high school and to insure that students are academically prepared for college when they are ready to go.

While clearly within reach, it is a goal SREB states have not yet attained.

1. ***Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?***
2. ***Are SREB states closing achievement gaps?***
3. ***Are students in SREB states being sufficiently prepared for college?***
4. ***How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?***

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[1] A full report, also entitled *ACT and SAT Scores in the South: The Challenge to Lead,* provides data to support the conclusions in this *Information Brief.* It is available in print and electronic formats and can be ordered or downloaded through the SREB website at **www.sreb.org**.

Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?

➢ ***Yes, scores have improved and the proportions of students taking the tests have increased. Yet improvement must continue until SREB states reach parity with the nation, and then lead the nation.***

Between 1992 and 2002:

- Thirteen SREB states (eight SAT states and five ACT states) improved their scores on the test that most of their students take, and all 13 increased the percentage of students they tested. These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.
- One ACT state, Kentucky, posted no change in scores, but it too increased the percentage of students tested.
- Two ACT states, Mississippi and Tennessee, had score declines, but they also showed the largest increases (along with Alabama) in the percentage of their seniors tested.
- Only one SREB state, Maryland, posted an average score on its dominant test (SAT) that matched the national average. It also increased the percentage of its students tested. In 1992, however, it posted a state average score higher than the national average.
- No SREB state posted an average score on its dominant test greater than the national average.

Are SREB states closing achievement gaps as measured by ACT and SAT scores?

➢ ***No. SREB states have not yet made much progress — as measured by ACT and SAT — in closing achievement gaps between black and white, and Hispanic and white students.***

Between 1998 and 2002:

- No SREB state narrowed the gap in scores between black and white students.
- Only four states narrowed the gap in scores between Hispanic and white students: Louisiana, Florida, Maryland and Virginia.
- The gap between ethnic minority students and their white counterparts remains wide within SREB states — wider than the overall score differences among states.

Are students being sufficiently prepared for college?

➢ ***No. Many SREB states are not yet successful in preparing a sufficient proportion of their students for college.***

- A significant number of students taking the ACT and SAT are not prepared for college at even basic levels of preparation.
- Too few students meet standard college admission thresholds.
- Too few students meet proficient college admission thresholds.
- When states factor in the high rates of high school dropouts, they must conclude that the achievement levels of far too many students are unacceptably low.

How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?

➢ ***While students in some SREB states are performing similarly to their counterparts nationally, in many states students are scoring considerably below their counterparts.***

A few SREB states rank high on the performance of some groups of their high schools seniors.

- Maryland stands out among SREB states. It ranks high nationally on the performance of white students, students in the first quartile and students who complete a college preparatory curriculum.
- Georgia and Florida place in the top half of all states for scores of black students.
- Five SREB states place in the top half of the nation for the performance of students in the first quartile; six rank similarly for those who completed a college preparatory curriculum.

Too many SREB states, however, place low. SREB states hold:

- Six of the last 10 places nationally for black students and those in the third quartile.
- Seven of the last 10 places nationally for overall student performance.
- Eight of the last 10 places nationally for white students and students in the first quartile.
- Eight of the last 10 places nationally for students who took the college preparatory curriculum.

Conclusions

The responses to the four questions clearly indicate that SREB states have made progress ***and*** that work lies ahead for them. Improving student achievement requires a comprehensive approach to educational reform and a redoubling of efforts to sustain progress. Eight key reform efforts are worth emphasizing because they have been embraced by SREB states and because they are likely responsible for the gains the South has already made. Continuing strides in these areas can provide the hope that southern states can lead the nation in educational improvement.

- Prekindergarten programs for ***all*** students, particularly those at risk.
- Assessment and accountability systems that inform schools, parents and policymakers about both student and school achievement.
- High standards for ***all*** children throughout the curriculum
- Support systems that enable students to catch up when they fall behind.
- Guidance and advisement services for students and their parents.
- School leaders who understand curriculum, instruction and school achievement.
- School systems that provide technical assistance to low-performing schools.
- Teachers who are qualified to teach the students and subjects they are assigned.
- Technology to support curriculum, teachers, students and parents.

This publication, along with the full report, was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education through the College Readiness Policy Connections initiative of the Southern Regional Education Board. It does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education nor imply endorsement by the Federal Government. For additional information contact Joan M. Lord, SREB's director of educational policies, who developed the report with the research assistance of Alexandria Williams (joan.lord@sreb.org).

(03E48)

Foreword

In the summer of 2002, newspaper headlines across the South announced two noteworthy stories in education. The first came in June, when 16 states, all members of the Southern Regional Education Board, pledged to lead the nation in educational progress. Their bold pronouncement, laid out in *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*, included a vow to move away from the negative labels of earlier eras and to reach beyond national averages.

Just as these headlines about goals for the future in SREB states receded from front pages across the South, new headlines in August announced that ACT, Inc. and The College Board had released the annual ACT and SAT state score reports. Serving as a reality check, the news — mixed at best — underscored the momentous challenge before SREB states if they are to improve student preparation.

The ACT and College Board test score reports hold both good and bad news. On the positive side:

- Scores have improved over a 10-year period.
- More high school seniors are taking the tests, thereby expressing interest in going to college.
- More students are taking a college preparatory curriculum, thereby preparing for college.

But the reports also point to the hurdles that lie ahead:

- SREB states have not made progress in closing achievement gaps between black and white students, nor between Hispanic and white students. In addition, other groups of students in SREB states — those who rank at the top or those who complete college preparatory studies — generally rank lower than their national counterparts.
- When college admission test scores are used to measure levels of readiness for college, they reveal that only a few SREB states are doing a good job of preparing all students.
- Students in SREB states have not reached parity on test scores with others in the nation.

This report in SREB's College Readiness Series poses four important questions for states about their students' readiness. It also suggests answers to those four questions, based on statistical data in the ACT and College Board reports. By clarifying the issues of college readiness that confront its states, SREB seeks to provide states with a tool to guide current and future policy decisions. With a goal as ambitious and meaningful as leading the nation, nothing is more important than informed decision-making. Fortunately, the 16 SREB states have a key advantage: momentum. SREB's states have made more progress and improved faster than the rest of the nation. One SREB governor has noted that a region that leads in educational improvement in the 1990s, "can someday lead the nation." Some might charge "wishful thinking." We believe that we can aim no lower.

Mark Musick
President

ACT and SAT Scores in the South:

The Challenge to Lead

This report examines college admission test scores in light of the new commitment among the 16 SREB states to lead the nation in educational progress. The scores come from the annual state profile reports on test performance prepared by ACT, Inc. and The College Board. SREB's *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* aims for national preeminence by:

- achieving readiness at each level of schooling
- closing achievement gaps related to ethnicity, income, gender and geography
- viewing schools and colleges as one system of education.

ACT and SAT test scores are readily identifiable (if imperfect) national measures of college readiness. They can help SREB states gauge what it will take to "lead the nation" by helping the states respond to the following four questions.

1. ***Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?***
2. ***Are SREB states closing achievement gaps?***
3. ***Are students in SREB states being sufficiently prepared for college?***
4. ***How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?***

QUESTION 1:

Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?

The news about improvement in ACT and SAT scores is positive. A review of the performance of high school seniors from both public and private high schools shows improvement in college admission test scores over the past 10 years in most SREB states. This increase — even when it is modest growth — is especially impressive because a greater proportion of high school seniors in all SREB states took the tests. Most noteworthy are the sizeable increases in students taking the tests in three states since 1992 — Alabama (16 percent), Mississippi (16 percent) and Tennessee (33 percent). [See Table I.]

Even with these increases in scores and the numbers of students taking tests, no state average on the state's dominant test[1] exceeded the national average for that test. Only one SREB state — Maryland — had high school seniors who reached parity with the nation. Table I shows the average scores for each SREB state in 1992 and 2002, along with the change in each state.

State average scores are generally lower in states that test a greater proportion of their students. As more students take the tests, the pool of tested students swells to include a broader cross section of high school seniors. Generally among SREB states, students in ACT-dominant states take the ACT in greater proportion than students in SAT-dominant states take the SAT. Thus ACT average scores in ACT states are lower than comparable SAT average scores in SAT states. So, when comparing performance among states, it is important to weigh both the average score *and* the proportion of seniors tested.

Focusing first on ACT states (left side of Table I, unshaded rows) and then on SAT states (right side of Table I, unshaded rows), the findings can be summarized as follows:

- Five ACT SREB states posted increases in scores. Yet no ACT SREB state achieved the national ACT average score of 20.8 in 2002. (See column D, unshaded rows.) In contrast most ACT states outside of SREB that tested more than 60 percent of their seniors *did* exceed the national average.
- Three ACT states — Alabama, Oklahoma and West Virginia — had increases in ACT scores exceeding the national increase. They thereby narrowed the gap between state and national ACT scores. It is particularly noteworthy that all three gains were coupled with impressive increases in the proportion of students tested. Oklahoma tested 7 percent more of its students, West Virginia 8 percent more, and Alabama 16 percent more.

[1] The term "dominant test" is used to indicate the test (ACT or SAT) that most students in a state take for college admission. References to the SAT refer throughout to the SAT I. When a state is referred to as an ACT state or SAT state, it means that the respective test is dominant in that state.

TABLE I: College admission test scores: 1992 and 2002
Average ACT and SAT scores for the 16 SREB states

	ACT The unshaded rows are for states in which ACT was the dominant test in 2002					SAT[1] The unshaded rows are for states in which SAT was the dominant test in 2002				
	1992		2002			1992		2002		
	Percent Tested[2] (A)	Average Score (B)	Percent Tested[2] (C)	Average Score (D)	Score Change (E)	Percent Tested[2] (F)	Average Score (G)	Percent Tested[2] (H)	Average Score (I)	Score Change (J)
Nation	34%	20.6	39%	20.8	0.2	42%	1001	46%	1020	19
AL	59%	19.8	75%	20.1	0.3	8%	1090	10%	1119	29
AR	63%	20.0	75%	20.2	0.2	6%	1085	6%	1116	31
DE	3%	21.9	2%	21.3	-0.6	68%	1000	71%	1002	2
FL	32%	20.7	40%	20.4	-0.3	47%	987	59%	995	8
GA	15%	20.4	22%	19.8	-0.6	64%	948	70%	980	32
KY	63%	20.0	71%	20.0	0.0	11%	1083	11%	1102	19
LA	74%	19.4	78%	19.6	0.2	10%	1087	8%	1120	33
MD	5%	20.2	11%	20.4	0.2	62%	1008	67%	1020	12
MS	70%	18.8	86%	18.6	-0.2	4%	1097	4%	1106	9
NC	5%	19.5	13%	19.9	0.4	57%	961	67%	998	37
OK	64%	20.0	71%	20.5	0.5	9%	1102	8%	1127	25
SC	5%	19.1	35%	19.2	0.1	64%	938	66%	981	43
TN	62%	20.2	95%	20.0	-0.2	12%	1107	16%	1117	10
TX	31%	19.9	30%	20.1	0.2	47%	980	51%	991	11
VA	4%	21.2	11%	20.6	-0.6	66%	995	68%	1016	21
WV	56%	19.8	64%	20.3	0.5	18%	1027	19%	1040	13

[1] 1992 SAT scores are adjusted to correspond to changes made in scoring in subsequent years through a process known as "recentering."

[2] These percentages vary from those provided by ACT and SAT. Percentage of college-bound seniors, from both public and private high schools, is based on NCES and WICHE data. See page 13 for technical notes.

- Two ACT states — Arkansas and Louisiana — maintained the same gap between state and national ACT scores as they had in 1992. But both states tested more students: Arkansas 12 percent more, Louisiana 4 percent more.
- Kentucky showed no change in tests scores but increased the number of students tested by 8 percent.
- Mississippi and Tennessee showed declines in ACT scores over the 10-year period. They were the only two states that had *both* the highest proportion and the greatest increase in percentage of students tested on their dominant test. (For further information on the importance of these changes, see *Factors That Affect Test Scores*, page 13.)

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- In 2002, the score of only one SAT state — Maryland — equaled the national average SAT score of 1020. No state exceeded the national average. Note however that Maryland's 1992 score had bettered the national average by seven points.
- Each of the SAT SREB states posted an increase both in SAT scores and in the proportion of students tested from 1992 to 2002.
- Four SAT states — Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia — increased their SAT average scores by more than 19 points, the gain recorded nationally. These states narrowed the gap between state and national average scores.
- One SAT state — South Carolina — stands out with huge back-to-back gains over two decades, posting a gain of 43 points from 1992 to 2002, following a 40-point increase between 1983 and 1992.

Chart I displays the percentage change in test scores for each SREB state from 1992 to 2002. Chart II displays the change in the percentage of students tested for these same years for these states.

Alabama, Oklahoma and West Virginia, among ACT states, narrowed the gap between state and national average scores with score increases exceeding the 1 percent change recorded nationally. Among SAT states, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia narrowed the gap between state scores and national scores. They each improved their SAT scores by more than 3.2 percent, the national rate of change.

CHART I: Percentage score change for SREB states: 1992 to 2002
Dominant college admission test in each state: ACT or SAT

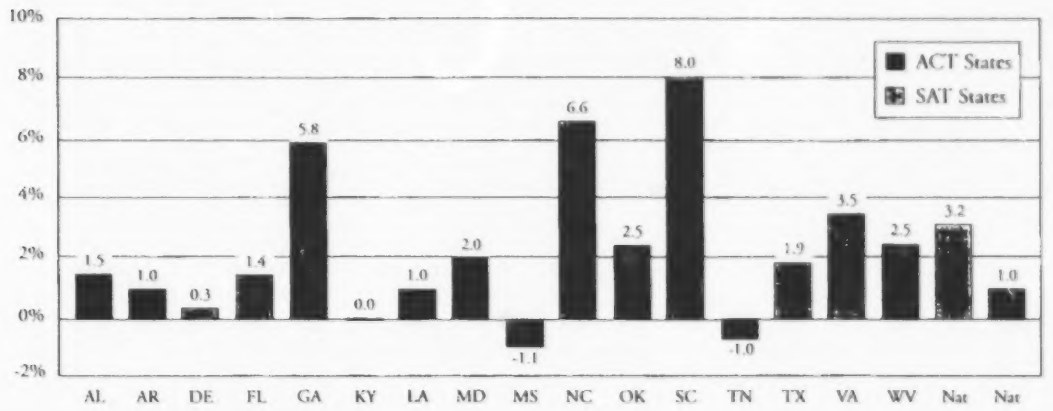
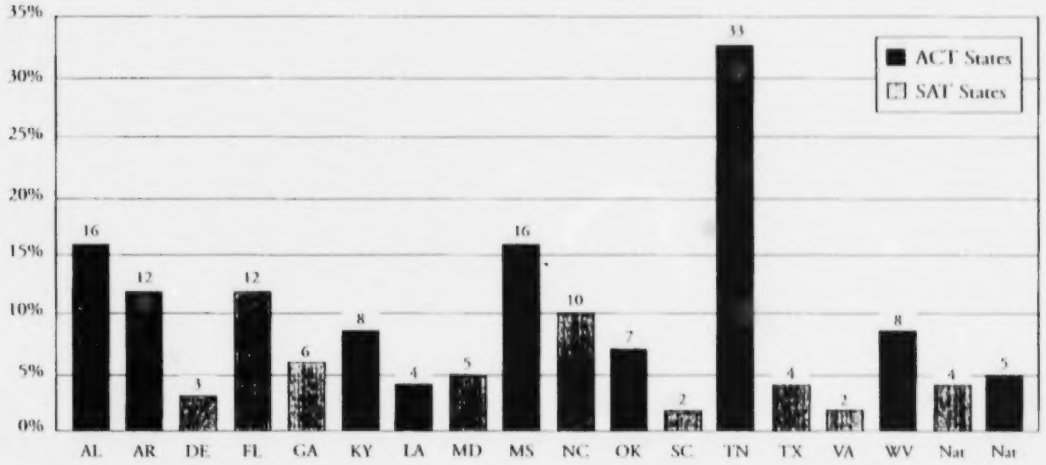


CHART II: Change in percentage of students taking the tests: 1992 to 2002
Dominant college admission test in each SREB state: ACT or SAT



QUESTION 1:

Are SREB states improving their ACT and SAT scores?

Between 1992 and 2002:

- Thirteen SREB states (eight SAT states and five ACT states) improved their scores on the test that most of their students take, and all 13 increased the percentage of students they tested.
- One ACT state — Kentucky — posted no change in scores, but it too increased the percentage of students tested.
- Two ACT states — Mississippi and Tennessee — had score declines, but they also showed the largest increases (along with Alabama) in the percentage of their seniors tested.
- Only one SREB state — Maryland — posted an average score on its dominant test (SAT) that matches the national average. It also increased the percentage of its students tested. In 1992, however, it posted a state average score higher than the national average.
- No SREB state posted an average score on its dominant test greater than the national average.

Yes, scores have improved and the proportions of students taking the tests have increased. Yet, improvement must continue until SREB states reach parity with the nation, and then lead the nation.

QUESTION 2:

Are SREB states closing achievement gaps as measured by ACT and SAT scores?

Goals for Education calls on SREB states not only to improve overall achievement, but also to assure that all groups of students make comparable educational progress. In short, it calls on *all* students to achieve at high levels.

The gaps in performance between black and white students on the SAT are over 100 points in all eight SREB SAT states, and they are over 200 points in six of them. The corresponding gap in ACT states for black and white students is three points in all of the states and four points in five of them. The scales on the two tests are vastly different (1 to 36 on the ACT and 400 to 1600 on the SAT), yet these gaps in the performance of black and white students on their respective scales represent statistically significant differences.

Average white students stand ahead of 60 percent of all students; *average* Hispanic students stand ahead of only one-third, and *average* black students stand ahead of just one-fourth of all students.

The gap in national average scores of black and white students on the SAT is also wide. For students who took the test across the nation in 2002, the gap between black and white students was 203 points, and the gap between Hispanic[1] and white students was 157 points. On the ACT, the gap between national average scores of black and white students is 4.9, and the gap between Hispanic and white students is 3.5. These gaps represent significant differences in performance. Table II provides a perspective in understanding the differences.

In looking at Table II, picture 100 high school seniors representing the nation—all of whom took the ACT—lined up according to their scores. Then picture a similar group, all of whom took the SAT. In general terms, the 40th student in each line is an *average* white student, who scored better than roughly 60 students. About two-thirds of the way down each line is an *average* Hispanic student, who scored better than approximately one-third of the students. And three-quarters of the way down each line is an *average* black student, who scored better than only one-fourth of the students. *These disparities in academic performance among black, Hispanic and white students must be addressed.*

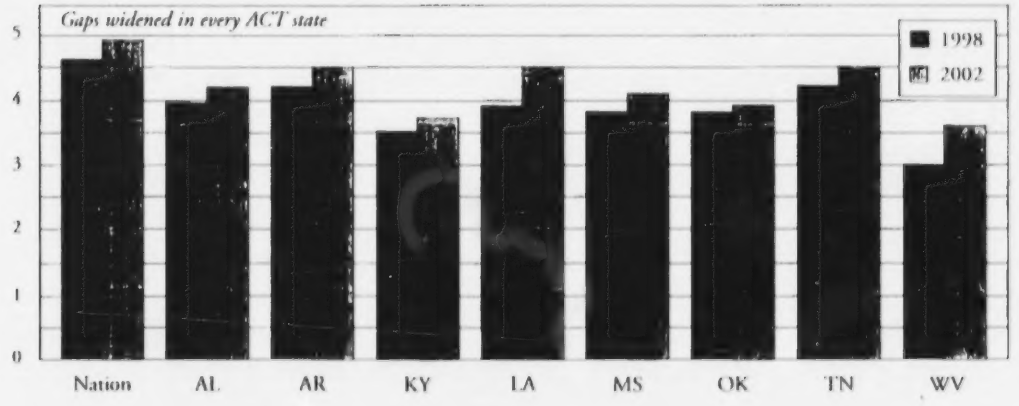
[1] ACT, Inc. and The College Board report scores for Hispanic students somewhat differently. ACT, Inc. reports these students in two categories: "Mexican-American/Chicano/Latino" and "Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Hispanic." SAT reports them in three categories: "Mexican or Mexican American," "Puerto Rican," and "Latin American, South American, Central American, or Other Hispanic or Latino." This report is based on the scores of students in the first of these categories for each test because these groups include more students.

TABLE II: Standing of average national scores: Black, Hispanic and white students: 2002

National Averages	ACT		SAT	
100 randomly selected students	Average Score	Approximate Standing Among 100 Students	Average Score	Approximate Standing Among 100 Students
25th highest score	24.1	25	1180	25
Average white student score	21.7	37	1060	41
50th highest score	20.5	50	1010	50
Average Hispanic Students	18.2	60	903	69
75th score	17.2	75	870	75
Average black student score	16.8	75	857	74

The alarming fact is that the gaps between black and white, and Hispanic and white students are widening in SREB states. Charts III through IV provide a picture of these achievement gaps four years ago and now. The bars in each chart represent the gaps between groups. The bars are grouped by state to show change between 1998 and 2002. The data included with the charts show the change in performance for the subgroups of students. These data report improvements for white students in 11 states. In contrast, only three states — Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia — posted any gains for black students.

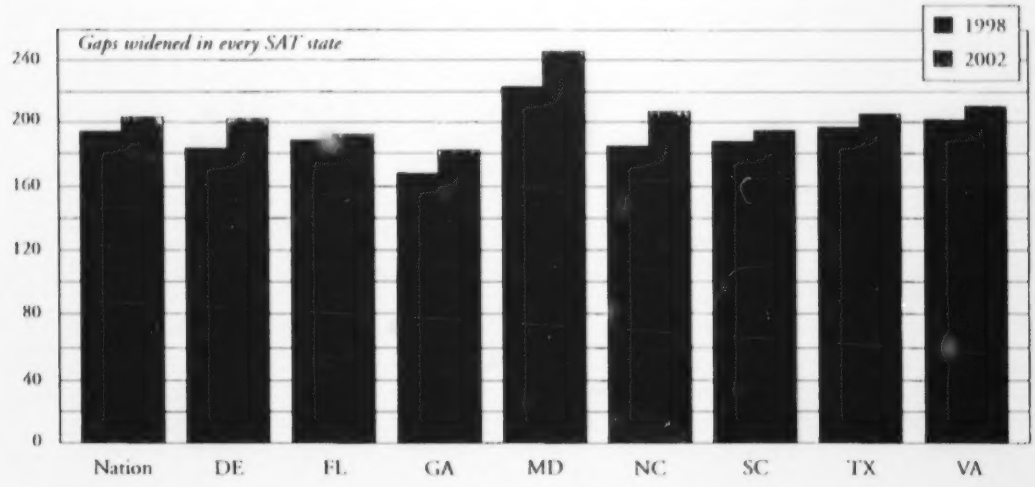
CHART III: Gaps for black and white students on the ACT in SREB states: 1998 and 2002



Change in average ACT scores for black and white students

	Nation	AL	AR	KY	LA	MS	OK	TN	WV
Black Students	-0.3	-0.1	-0.4	-0.4	-0.2	-0.3	-0.1	0	-0.4
White Students	0	+0.1	-0.1	-0.2	+0.4	0	0	+0.3	+0.2

CHART IV: Gaps for black and white students on the SAT in SREB states: 1998 and 2002



Change in average SAT scores for black and white students

	Nation	DE	FL	GA	MD	NC	SC	TX	VA
Black Students	-3	-9	-5	+4	-7	0	+18	-10	+1
White Students	+6	+11	-1	+15	+15	+20	+24	+4	+9

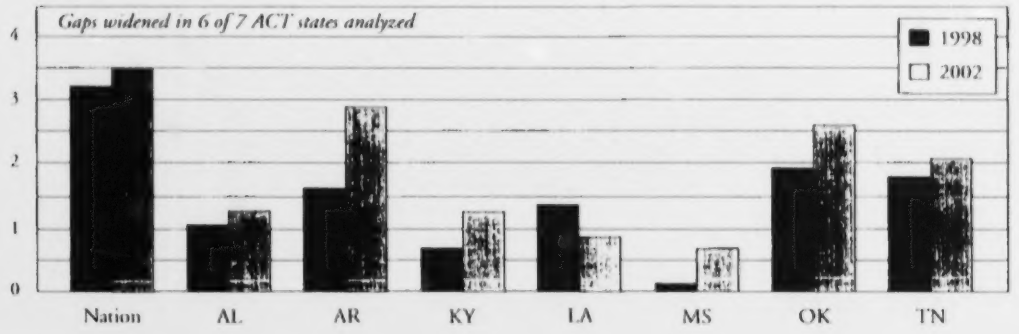
The irony for South Carolina is that both black and white students improved more than in any other state, 18 and 24 points respectively. Yet because white students gained more, the gap between the two groups increased — by six points.

On its dominant test — ACT or SAT — not one SREB state closed the gap between black and white students between 1998 and 2002.

In spite of general — and sometimes considerable — improvement in scores, not one SREB state closed the gap between black and white students. The gaps are not as wide between Hispanic and white students in the nation or in SREB states as they are between black and white students.

The gaps between Hispanic and white students in three SREB SAT states are less than 100 points, but they reach 150 points or more in two states. Among ACT states, the gaps are less than two points in four states, but they reach over 2.5 points in two states. For the respective scales of the tests, these gaps are wide and represent statistically significant differences in student achievement. Considering both tests, scores improved for Hispanic students in just three states — Louisiana, Maryland and Virginia. Only four states — Florida, Louisiana, Maryland and Virginia — narrowed the gap between Hispanic students and white students, and three of these states did so by improving both Hispanic scores and white scores.

CHART V: Gaps for Hispanic and white students on the ACT in SREB states: 1998 and 2002

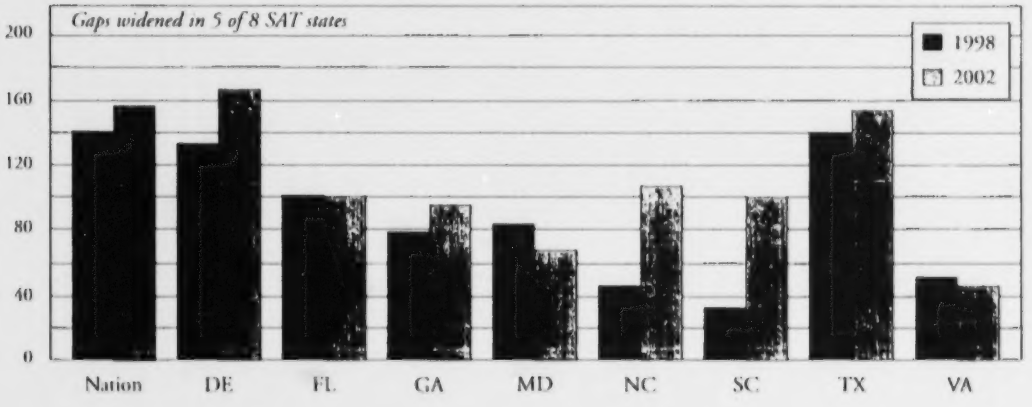


Change in average ACT scores for Hispanic and white students

	Nation	AL	AR	KY	LA	MS	OK	TN	WV
Hispanic Students	-0.3	-0.1	-1.3	-0.8	+0.9	-0.6	-0.7	0	N/A
White Students	0	0.1	-0.1	-0.2	+0.4	0	0	+0.3	+0.2

NA = average not available: fewer than 100 students. West Virginia is therefore not included in chart.

CHART VI: Gaps for Hispanic and white students on the SAT in SREB states: 1998 and 2002



Change in average SAT scores for Hispanic and white students

	Nation	DE	FL	GA	MD	NC	SC	TX	VA
Hispanic Students	-10	-19	0	-3	+27	-41	-43	-11	+13
White Students	+6	+11	-1	+15	+15	+20	+24	+4	+9

The differences in scores of ethnic subgroups within states are, in fact, greater than the overall differences from state to state.

These differences in scores of ethnic subgroups within states are, in fact, greater than the overall differences from state to state. The difference between the highest SREB SAT state (Maryland at 1020) and the lowest (Georgia at 980) is 40 points, while the differences between black and white students in those states are 244 points in Maryland and 182 points in Georgia.

An individual state's attention to score gaps is better directed to score differences within the state than to differences between its own and neighboring state's overall student achievement.

QUESTION 2:

Are SREB states closing achievement gaps as measured by ACT and SAT scores?

- Between 1998 and 2002, no SREB state narrowed the gap between black and white students.
- Only four states narrowed the gap between Hispanic and white students: Florida, Louisiana, Maryland and Virginia.
- The gap between ethnic minority students and their white counterparts remains wide within SREB states—wider than the differences among states.

No. SREB states have not yet made much progress — as measured by ACT and SAT — in closing achievement gaps between black and white, and Hispanic and white students.

Factors That Affect Test Scores

What do the tests measure? According to ACT, the ACT Assessment measures students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work. It covers four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading and science reasoning. According to The College Board, the SAT I Reasoning Test measures verbal and mathematical reasoning abilities. Verbal questions test students' ability to understand and analyze what they read, to recognize relationships between parts of a sentence and to establish relationships between pairs of words. Mathematics questions test their ability to solve problems involving arithmetic, algebra and geometry.

Why does this report show a different percentage of a state's high school seniors who took the test than the ACT and SAT score profiles report? Throughout this report, the percentage of seniors taking a state's dominant test is based on two projections. Those for *public* high school graduates for 2001-2002 were made by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2001and those for *private* high school graduates for 2001-2002 were made by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in 1998. WICHE also provides projections for *public* high school students, but its 2001 projections were made in 1998. Both ACT and SAT use WICHE's 1998 projections for both *public* and *private* high school seniors. The more-recent NCES projections of public school students have a higher probability of accuracy. NCES does not project private high school graduates. A similar adjustment was made for 1992 data.

Does it matter that the proportion of a state's students taking the tests differs? One key requirement for most statistically valid comparisons is *random inclusion of the subjects.* In an ideal research environment, equal numbers of students for each test would be drawn randomly from a group that represents all college-bound seniors. In fact, the groups are not formed randomly, a problem in most educational research. So, how do we decide which set of test scores (ACT or SAT) in a state is more representative of its students? The average score that reflects the *greater proportion and wider range* of college-bound seniors is the more representative score. In each of the 16 SREB states, more than half of the high school seniors took one of the tests. This report focuses on that test, and it is referred to as the dominant test.

Does it matter that the proportion of students taking the dominant test differs from state to state? The difference in proportion of students tested on the dominant test from state to state *does* matter—for basically the same statistical reason indicated for differences in proportion within states (see above). Average scores based on the performance of a small proportion of high school seniors generally represent only a few low-achieving students. In contrast, when averages are based on the performance of significantly more students, the average scores include more low-achieving students in addition to the high-performing students. When comparing scores from state to state, it is important to know whether the average score represents, for example, 60 percent or 90 percent of all seniors. We would expect a higher average score from the smaller group because it likely reflects the performance of fewer low-achieving students. To wit, both Mississippi and Tennessee posted declines on the ACT (see Chart I), but both states tested larger percentages of their high school seniors (84 and 95 percent respectively) than other states in the region. In sharp contrast, eight SREB states tested 70 percent or fewer of their seniors on their dominant test. Average scores based on Mississippi or Tennessee's top 70 percent of students would likely be closer to the average scores of other states. Any comparisons from state to state should weigh proportion of students tested *and* scores.

QUESTION 3:

Are students in SREB states being sufficiently prepared for college?

When focusing attention on *average scores by state,* even with a special look at the performance of black, Hispanic and white students, policy-makers can miss a key element. They also need to be able to answer the question, "How many of our students are ready for college when they finish high school?" As the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has emphasized, it is important to know how many students in each state have mastered academic skills and content at various levels. To aid in this assessment, NAEP reports the percentage of students by state achieving benchmarks of "basic," "proficient" and "advanced" in a variety of subjects.

The ACT and SAT state profile reports provide sufficient detail to help states gauge the preparedness of their students against college readiness benchmarks routinely used by college admission officers. The profile reports provide the percentage of students who score within specific ranges and make it possible for states to monitor not just average state scores, but also the proportion of students scoring at various levels.

Other ways to monitor readiness include tracking the percentage of students who need remediation in college and monitoring the percentage of students who pass standard college freshman courses such as English, history and mathematics. Because college admission test scores are statistically good predictors of success in the freshman year of college, they are useful in projecting the percentage of students who will need remediation and the percentage of students who will have difficulty in standard college courses.[1] Thus monitoring these scores as measures of college readiness is important. It also allows policymakers to monitor student performance at four fixed levels of readiness, rather than rely on the moving targets of state and national averages.

Neither ACT nor College Board has established formal benchmarks of college readiness based on test scores. Colleges, however, routinely use score thresholds combined with high school grades to determine the admissibility of their applicants and the college readiness of their freshman students. (See Lord, *High School to College and Careers: Aligning State Policies, 2002.*) Likewise, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) uses score thresholds as one determinant of athletic eligibility for students who do not have a 3.55 high school core GPA.

[1] ACT and SAT scores coupled with high school grades are even better predictors of success in college.

College Readiness Benchmarks		
ACT	**SAT**	**Category**
17	400V 400M	Basic
19	450V 450M	Admissible
21	500V 500M	Standard
26	600V 600M	Proficient

- Scores of 17 ACT or 400 SAT verbal/400 SAT mathematics are generally sufficient for admission to degree programs at non-selective institutions, but students with these scores are generally required to take remedial courses. For students who seek athletic eligibility at Division I or II schools but do not meet NCAA's 3.55 GPA requirement, NCAA requires minimum "sum of the four components" ACT scores[4] of 68 (averaging 17) or combined verbal and mathematics minimum SAT scores of 820. Students who score at these minimum levels must also have a minimum high school core GPA of 2.5 to meet athletic eligibility minimum standards.
- Scores of 19 ACT and 450 SAT verbal/450 SAT mathematics are typical admission thresholds at four-year public colleges. Many of these colleges further test students who score below 21 ACT or 500 SAT verbal or mathematics for college readiness. They require some of these students to take remedial courses. NCAA requires students with 2.0 high school core GPAs to have ACT "sum of four components scores" of 86 (averaging 21.5) or SAT scores of 1010 for athletic eligibility at Division I and II institutions.
- Scores of 21 ACT or 500 SAT verbal or mathemtics are standard admisson thresholds.
- ACT scores of 26 and SAT verbal and mathematics scores of 600 are typically required for admission to selective programs (e.g., engineering) or selective/competitive institutions, although such programs and institutions will have other requirements as well. All of these thresholds, can serve as benchmarks for college readiness.

In Tables III and IV, college readiness in SREB states is indexed by levels labeled *basic, admissible, standard* and *proficient*. Table III reports the proportion of students in SREB ACT states who achieve the benchmarks based on their ACT composite score. Table IV reports the proportion of students in SREB SAT states who achieve the benchmarks based on their verbal and on their mathematics SAT subtests. The percentages of students tested who score at or above each level indicate how well a state is preparing its students for college.

Like other analyses, this method must consider the proportion of high school seniors taking the tests. As discussed earlier, SREB ACT states generally test a larger proportion of students (64 percent to 95 percent) than SREB SAT states (59 percent to 71 percent). Thus the SREB ACT states generally include students who represent a broader spectrum of educational achievement, resulting in lower average scores.

The ACT and SAT score reports, moreover, differ in the way they report the proportion of students at each score level. ACT reports the proportions for each of its subcategories[4] and for the composite. In contrast, SAT reports the proportions for the verbal and mathematics subscores but does not report them for the combined verbal and mathematics score.

[4] English, mathematics, natural science and social studies.

The correlation between ACT's composite score and SAT's combined mathematics and verbal score is quite strong. But the correlation of subscores is not strong enough to warrant comparison. It is, therefore, not advisable to compare data in Table III to data in Table IV.

TABLE III: Percentage of students tested scoring at or above college readiness benchmarks: ACT scores in SREB states for 2002

	Students		Basic	Admissible	Standard	Proficient
States	Percent* HS Seniors Tested	Number Taking Tests	17	19	21	26
AL	75%	30,955	68%	51%	35%	10%
AR	75%	21,007	68%	52%	37%	11%
KY	71%	29,532	68%	50%	35%	10%
LA	78%	36,360	63%	49%	32%	9%
MS	86%	23,395	53%	36%	24%	6%
OK	71%	26,717	72%	55%	39%	12%
TN	95%	44,307	74%	51%	35%	10%
WV	64%	11,451	72%	54%	37%	9%

* These percentages vary from those provided by ACT and SAT. Percentages of college-bound seniors are based on NCES and WICHE data. See page 13 for technical note.

TABLE IV: Percentage of students tested scoring at or above college readiness benchmarks: SAT scores in SREB states for 2002

	Students		Basic		Admissible		Standard		Proficient	
States	Percent* HS Seniors Tested	Number Taking Tests	400 Verbal	400 Math	450 Verbal	450 Math	500 Verbal	500 Math	600 Verbal	600 Math
DE	71%	5,737	83%	81%	69%	67%	51%	51%	20%	20%
FL	59%	75,664	84%	84%	69%	69%	50%	51%	18%	20%
GA	70%	53,720	81%	81%	66%	65%	47%	47%	17%	17%
MD	67%	38,813	82%	83%	69%	71%	53%	57%	23%	26%
NC	67%	46,180	82%	85%	66%	71%	48%	54%	18%	21%
SC	66%	22,363	81%	82%	65%	66%	46%	48%	16%	17%
TX	51%	116,457	80%	83%	65%	68%	47%	51%	17%	20%
VA	68%	50,437	84%	85%	71%	71%	54%	55%	22%	24%

* These percentages vary from those provided by ACT and SAT. Percentages of college-bound seniors are based on NCES and WICHE data. See page 13 for technical note.

After accounting for these limitations, it remains that student performance in ACT and SAT states are different. *An important factor that distinguishes the two groups of states and likely affects test scores is poverty. Seven of the eight SREB ACT states have poverty rates over 25 percent among children, with a range of 21 to 30 percent. Seven of eight SREB SAT states, by contrast, have poverty rates less than 25 percent among children, with a range of 14 to 26 percent. Poverty rates are known to be correlated with test scores.*

- In Florida, Virginia and North Carolina, 84 percent of the students taking the tests met basic levels of preparation, a percentage in line with expectations of normal statistical distributions. Among lower-performing states, however, approximately one in three students did *not* meet the basic level of readiness.
- In only four SAT states — Delaware, Florida, Maryland and Virginia — 50 percent or more of the students achieved the standard level on the verbal and mathematics subtests, as would be expected in normal statistical distributions. Two others achieved 50 percent in mathematics — North Carolina and Texas. In other states, the proportion is much lower. No ACT state had 50 percent of its students reach the standard level.
- Nearly all of the SAT states reached the expected proportion of proficient students — 16 percent. None of the ACT states did. The proportion of students at the proficient level ranges from one in four students in some states to less than one in 10 students in others.

Another issue compounds the problem of inadequate college preparation for students. Many SREB states have high rates of students' dropping out of high school before graduation. (See Creech, *Reducing Dropout Rates*, 2000.) It is clear that too many students are lost on the way to college — some because they quit high school and some because they do not meet expectations for admission to college. ***The stark conclusion is that most SREB states are not getting sufficient numbers of students ready for college.***

QUESTION 3:

Are students in SREB states being sufficiently prepared for college?

- A significant number of students taking the ACT and SAT are not prepared for college at basic levels of preparation.
- Too few students meet standard college admission thresholds.
- Too few students meet proficient college admission thresholds.
- When states factor in the high rates of high school dropouts, they must conclude that the achievement levels of far too many students are unacceptably low.

No. Many SREB states are not yet successful in preparing a sufficient proportion of their students for college.

QUESTION 4:

How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?

"Bragging rights" — which are important in political campaigns and among sports enthusiasts — should not be based on admission test results.

Every year, the summer release of college admission test scores leads to news headlines comparing each state to its neighbors and the nation. But "bragging rights" —which are important perhaps in political campaigns and among sports enthusiasts — should not be based on college admission test scores. In fact, test makers urge restraint in comparing test scores because the proportions of students tested and the demographic profiles of students vary from state to state. (See also *Factors That Affect Test Scores*, page 13.)

In its discussion of college readiness, *Goals for Education* encourages states to monitor multiple measures of college preparation beyond college admission test scores, including:

- the percentage of high school students taking the college preparatory curriculum
- the number taking advanced high school and college-level coursework
- the number taking challenging mathematics courses in the senior year.

Yet comparisons are inevitable and when undertaken with appropriate caution, they can provide important insights about state progress in relation to regional or national efforts. If a state is not making progress, policy-makers can learn from states that are gaining. Comparisons can also help SREB states assess, in a general way, their current status in light of their goal to lead the nation.

To provide this national context, Tables V through VIII display average scores for each SREB state's dominant test on a single scale.[3] The national rankings were developed by creating an array of the average state scores on the dominant tests for all 50 states, reported on the SAT scale. This somewhat unusual presentation of scores — all results on one scale — allows for a look at state-by-state results of student performance across all 16 SREB states.

[3] Where SAT is the dominant test, the SAT average score has been entered in Tables V-VIII. Where ACT is the dominant test, the ACT average score has been converted to an SAT proxy score based on a concordance of scores. The concordance (The College Board, 1999) is based on scores of a sample of 103,525 students who took both the ACT and SAT I in 1994-1996. The correlation between the scores is high (.92), permitting confidence that each test similarly identifies the relative standing of students. The scores are not considered interchangeable, however, as the tests are designed differently. See *Factors That Affect Test Scores*, page 13, for test design information.

No SREB state average score ranks among the top 10 in the nation. Fourteen of the 16 SREB states rank in the bottom half of the nation. Even more disturbing, 12 of them are among the bottom 15 states in the nation. ***Although scores in SREB states have improved over the past 10 years, they must improve dramatically if SREB states are to lead the nation.***

Is the goal unreachable? No, although it will require effort and time. The differences in average scores between the top two SREB states — Maryland and Virginia — and the 10th nationally ranked state are close. Maryland's average SAT score of 1020 is only two points away from the 10th nationally ranked state, and Virginia's SAT score of 1016 is only six points away from that of the 10th nationally ranked state. The difference between SREB's eighth-ranked state — Georgia — and the nation's 25th-ranked state is 26 points. Over the past 10 years, three SREB states — Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina — have increased their scores by 32, 37 and 40 points respectively. The gaps in ranking are clearly not insurmountable.

TABLE V: ACT and SAT scores reported on the SAT scale: 2002

State	Dominant Test[1]	Percent Tested[2]	Average Score[3] Reported as SAT scores	Rank	
				SREB	National
Nation			1020		
AL	ACT	75%	954	12	43
AR	ACT	75%	958	11	42
DE	SAT	71%	1002	3	27
FL	SAT	59%	995	5	36
GA	SAT	70%	980	8	39
KY	ACT	71%	950	13	46
LA	ACT	78%	934	15	49
MD	SAT	67%	1020	1	11
MS	ACT	86%	894	16	50
NC	SAT	67%	998	4	33
OK	ACT	71%	970	9	40
SC	SAT	64%	981	7	38
TN	ACT	95%	950	13	47
TX	SAT	51%	991	6	37
VA	SAT	68%	1016	2	15
WV	ACT	64%	962	10	41

[1] The dominant test is defined as the one taken by more than half of the students in state.

[2] See Table I for notes on percentage tested.

[3] Average score on state's dominant test. ACT test scores (shown in red) are reported as corresponding SAT scores based on a concordance published by The College Board (see College Board, 1999).

Not only is it important for state leaders to monitor their state's overall standing, it is also valuable for them to monitor how various groups of students are achieving in relation to similar groups in other states. In doing so, they can determine how well these subgroups are being served. Table VI displays how performances of white and black students in SREB states compare to their counterparts in other states.

TABLE VI: ACT and SAT scores reported on the SAT scale: 2002 Black and white students

		Black Students				White Students			
	Dominant Test	Average Score[1] Reported as SAT score	Percent of All Students Tested in the State[2]	Rank		Average Score[1] Reported as SAT score	Percent of All Students Tested in the State[2]	Rank	
				SREB	Nation			SREB	Nation
Nation	SAT	857				1060			
AL	ACT	830	25%	10	38	998	68%	9	43
AR	ACT	805	16%	13	47	990	73%	10	45
DE	SAT	836	17%	8	33	1039	73%	6	19
FL	SAT	851	15%	1	19	1044	59%	5	17
GA	SAT	851	27%	1	19	1033	63%	8	22
KY	ACT	810	7%	12	46	962	86%	15	49
LA	ACT	805	28%	13	47	990	62%	10	45
MD	SAT	848	27%	3	22	1092	58%	1	2
MS	ACT	780	35%	16	50	954	57%	16	50
NC	SAT	839	21%	6	28	1046	70%	4	16
OK	ACT	834	7%	9	35	990	70%	10	45
SC	SAT	839	26%	6	28	1034	68%	7	21
TN	ACT	800	17%	15	49	986	74%	13	47
TX	SAT	840	12%	5	27	1052	55%	3	11
VA	SAT	848	18%	3	22	1058	68%	2	9
WV	ACT	820	3%	11	43	966	90%	14	49

[1] Average score on state's dominant test. ACT test scores (shown in red) are reported as corresponding SAT scores based on a concordance published by The College Board (see College Board, 1999). Also, The College Board reports that SAT data may be slightly inflated due to differences in the way web and paper registrants responded to the student survey, including their self report on race.

[2] See Table 1 for notes on percentage tested.

- Among SREB states, Maryland and Virginia rank high. They are first and second respectively for all students and for white students, and tied for third for black students.
- Among SREB states, Florida and Georgia lead in the performance of black students.

- Maryland and Virginia place among the top 10 states nationally for white students, but no SREB state places among the top 10 states nationally for black students.
- Four states — Florida, Georgia, Maryland and Virginia — place in the top half of the nation for black students.
- Six SREB states place among the bottom 10 states for black students, and eight states placed similarly for white students.
- **Six states rank among the bottom 10 states for all three groups: all students, black students and white students.**

Following the progress of two additional groups of students gives policy-makers information about the performance of a state's most likely candidates for college and those who will likely need additional support to become prepared for college. Table VII provides this information on students in the first and third quartiles. Students in the first quartile are

TABLE VII: Students in the first and third quartiles SAT and ACT combined analysis: 2002

State/Dominant Test			First-Quartile Students			Third-Quartile Students		
	Test	Percent Taking the Test	Average Score[1] Reported as SAT scores	Rank		Average Score[1] Reported as SAT scores	Rank	
				SREB	Nation		SREB	Nation
Nation	SAT		1180			870		
AL	ACT	75%	1074	12	46	815	11	42
AR	ACT	75%	1090	10	43	810	12	43
DE	SAT	71%	1160	2	11	850	4	30
FL	SAT	59%	1140	5	21	860	1	23
GA	SAT	70%	1120	7	36	830	9	40
KY	ACT	71%	1074	12	46	805	13	44
LA	ACT	78%	1054	15	49	780	15	48
MD	SAT	67%	1190	1	1	860	1	23
MS	ACT	86%	1002	16	50	744	16	50
NC	SAT	67%	1150	4	16	850	4	30
OK	ACT	71%	1094	9	41	830	9	40
SC	SAT	64%	1120	7	36	840	6	37
TN	ACT	95%	1078	11	44	800	14	45
TX	SAT	51%	1130	6	28	840	6	37
VA	SAT	68%	1160	2	11	860	1	23
WV	ACT	64%	1074	12	46	838	8	39

[1] Average score on state's dominant test. ACT test scores (shown in red) are reported as corresponding SAT scores based on a concordance published by The College Board.

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TABLE VIII: Students taking the ACT or SAT and completing a college preparatory curriculum: Combined analysis for 2002

State/Dominant Test			Students completing College Preparatory Curriculum[1]			
	Test	Percent Taking the Test	Average Score[2] Reported as SAT score	Percent taking College Prep. Curriculum	Rank	
					SREB	Nation
Nation			1057			
AL	ACT	75%	990	66%	11	45
AR	ACT	75%	986	71%	13	47
DE	SAT	71%	1082	51%	2	13
FL	SAT	59%	1077	44%	3	14
GA	SAT	70%	1057	44%	7	28
KY	ACT	71%	982	58%	14	48
LA	ACT	78%	970	71%	15	49
MD	SAT	67%	1104	54%	1	7
MS	ACT	86%	942	53%	16	50
NC	SAT	67%	1076	46%	4	15
OK	ACT	71%	1022	53%	9	42
SC	SAT	64%	1050	52%	8	32
TN	ACT	95%	990	60%	11	45
TX	SAT	51%	1072	48%	6	19
VA	SAT	68%	1073	67%	5	17
WV	ACT	64%	1014	35%[3]	10	43

[1] College Board reports that SAT data may be slightly inflated due to differences in the way web and paper registrants responded to the student survey, including student reports on the courses they have taken.

[2] Average score on state's dominant test. ACT test scores (shown in red) are reported as corresponding SAT scores based on a concordance published by The College Board (College Board, 1999).

[3] West Virginia's ninth and tenth graders take integrated science courses. Many students fail to report those courses as college preparatory, although they meet West Virginia's college preparatory requirements. The state score profile therefore likely underreports students who complete the college preparatory curriculum.

those in the top 25 percent in each state. Students in the third quartile are those 25 percent scoring just below average. The performance of students who take the core curriculum is also important as an indicator of the rigor of the state's curriculum in preparing those who completed it. Table VIII provides data on how these students are performing relative to others in the region and nation.

The relative standing of states with respect to their top achieving students (first quartile), those just below average (third quartile) and those taking the college preparatory curriculum is disappointing. While one SREB state holds first-place rankings nationally, students in SREB states are generally among the lowest-scoring students.

- Maryland ranks first in the nation for the performance of students in the first quartile and those taking the college preparatory curriculum. Four other states — Delaware, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia — place in the top half of the nation for these students. Texas ranks in the top half for students taking the college preparatory curriculum. Six SREB states rank among the bottom 10 states with respect to both of these groups of students.
- No SREB state ranks high for the performance of students in the third quartile. Only three states — Florida, Maryland and Virginia — rank in the top half of states in preparing third quartile students for college. Six SREB states rank among the last 10 states.

It is good news that nearly all SREB states posted an increase in the number of students who reported that they took a college preparatory curriculum. Table VIII indicates the percentage of students who report that they completed such a curriculum in 2002. The percentage of students by SREB state who completed the college preparatory curriculum among college-bound seniors in 1992 ranged from 23 percent to 54 percent. It currently ranges by SREB state from 35 percent to 71 percent.

QUESTION 4:

How do students in SREB states compare with students nationally?

A few SREB states rank high on the performance of some groups of their high school seniors.

- Maryland stands out among SREB states. It ranks high nationally on the performance of white students, students in the first quartile and students who complete a college preparatory curriculum.
- Georgia and Florida place in the top half of all states for scores of black students.
- Five SREB states place in the top half of the nation for the performance of students in the first quartile; six rank similarly for those who completed a college preparatory curriculum.

Too many SREB states, however, place low. SREB states hold:

- Six of the last 10 places nationally for black students and those in the third quartile.
- Seven of the last 10 places nationally for overall student performance.
- Eight of the last 10 places nationally for white students and students in the first quartile.
- Eight of the last 10 places nationally for students who took the college preparatory curriculum.

While students in some SREB states are performing similarly to their counterparts nationally, in many states students are scoring considerably below their counterparts.

Conclusion

The responses to the four questions raised in this report clearly indicate that progress has been made *and* that work lies ahead. Yet it takes years for improvements in early grades reading or preschool programs to impact college readiness. Further the impact of motivational campaigns and expanded scholarship programs may not show up in achievement measures for years.

Improving student achievement requires a comprehensive approach to educational reform and a redoubling of efforts to sustain it. SREB's *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*, along with SREB's *High Schools That Work* research findings, points to a number of imperatives for the future if progress is to continue. SREB states must embrace these imperatives as they find the way to educational improvement. Eight key efforts are worth emphasizing:

- Prekindergarten programs for all students, particularly those at risk.
- Assessment systems that inform schools and parents about student achievement, and accountability systems that inform policy-makers and parents about school achievement.
- High standards throughout the curriculum: eighth graders taking Algebra I; seniors making full use of their fourth year in high school — taking International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses.
- Support systems that enable students to catch up when they fall behind (after school, summer and weekend programs), address students' physical and social problems early, and include reading and mathematics specialists in every school.
- Guidance and advisement services for students and their parents to encourage students to attempt challenging academic courses and encourage parents to support students' efforts.
- School leaders who understand curriculum, instruction and school achievement, and school systems that provide technical assistance to low-performing schools, coaching for teachers, and curriculum alignment.
- Teachers who are qualified to teach what they are assigned to teach.
- Technology to support the curriculum, train teachers, inform parents, and support students.

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Goals for Education

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for postsecondary education and a career.
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
12. The state places a high priority on an education *system* of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.

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